

## Nerve Cells and Neurotransmission

The brain is made up of billions of nerve cells, also known as neurons. Typically, a neuron contains three important parts (Figure 4): a central cell body that directs all activities of the neuron; dendrites, short fibers that receive messages from other neurons and relay them to the cell body; and an axon, a long single fiber that transmits messages from the cell body to the dendrites of other neurons or to body tissues, such as muscles. Although most neurons contain all of the three parts, there is a wide range of diversity in the shapes and sizes of neurons as well as their axons and dendrites.

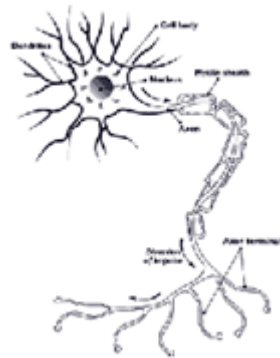


Figure 4 Click the image to enlarge.

The transfer of a message from the axon of one nerve cell to the dendrites of another is known as neurotransmission. Although axons and dendrites are located extremely close to each other, the transmission of a message from an axon to a dendrite does not occur through direct contact. Instead, communication between nerve cells occurs mainly through the release of chemical substances into the space between the axon and dendrites. This space is known as the synapse. When neurons communicate, a message, traveling as an electrical impulse, moves down an axon and toward the synapse. There it triggers the release of molecules called neurotransmitters from the axon into the synapse. The neurotransmitters then move across the synapse and bind to special molecules, called receptors, that are located within the cell membranes of the dendrites of the adjacent nerve cell. This, in turn, stimulates or inhibits an electrical response in the receiving neuron's dendrites. Thus, the neurotransmitters act as chemical messengers, carrying information from one neuron to another.